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Laura Weigert, *French Visual Culture and the Making of Medieval Theater*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Xx + 290 pp. \$105.00 U.S. (cl). Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN 9781107040472.

Review by Christina Normore, Northwestern University.

Laura Weigert's *French Visual Culture and the Making of Medieval Theater* is replete with thoughtful considerations of visual materials, but its intended audience is only in part members of her own field of art history. For such readers, the first half of the book in particular offers both a welcome addition to other recent work on the varied and sometimes strange mixings of media that took place in the pivotal years between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Many of Weigert's most pointed arguments--and the second half of her study--are directed at historians of theater. I leave such historians to assess whether they recognize the picture of their field that Weigert draws here: if so, then this study is not only an important one for art historians, but also an essential read for historians of theater.

The introduction is (nearly) framed by two images that speak to the book's intervention into theater history. Figure 1 shows the frontispiece to Cailleau's *Theater or Stage*, which portrays a linear series of sets within a single frame; figure 9 the equally familiar scene of the martyrdom of Saint Apollonia by Jean Fouquet. Although they date to the sixteenth and late fifteenth centuries respectively, these scenes are commonly used to illustrate the typical spatial practices, subject matter, and cultural functions of "medieval" theater. Weigert masterfully complicates this interpretive approach and the concept of medieval theater it has enabled by tracing the historiographic evolution of (predominantly French) theater scholarship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her final two figures are particularly compelling examples of this process of codification and its dissemination: two three-dimensional dioramas based on the miniature and print that were constructed for the Parisian Exposition Universelle (1878) and Exposition Internationale (1937) to bring the supposed historical reality of medieval theater to life for modern viewers and identify it indelibly with the French patrimony. Between these bookends, the introduction considers the iconographies of antique theater, particularly in images associated with Terence's Comedies, which likewise have been treated as depictions of medieval performance practices. Weigert draws attention to the rhetorical intent of such images, particularly their role as condemnations of the pagan past, convincingly arguing that they should be treated not as neutral antiquarian acts or representations of the realities of medieval theater, but by rather as part of a moralizing agenda. This critique of the evidentiary function of prints and miniatures is complicated, however, by Weigert's desire to preserve some connection between pictorial representations and the performances they depict, a relationship she somewhat problematically places under the term theatricality.

This tension persists throughout the book. Chapter one considers street performances. Weigert focuses on one of the earliest extant festival books, which depicts a *joyeuse entrée* of Johanna of Castile into Brussels (Berlin, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Cod. 2591), which she presents as evidence for actual events. Drawing on both the miniatures and text, she notes a number of key differences between modern and medieval performance norms. On pages 31-45, she raises very interesting points concerning the monetary

value and skilled craftsmanship attached to scaffolding and its formal difference from the classical theater, provocatively suggesting parallels between these stages and the frames and covering devices typical of contemporary altarpieces. She further notes the range of positions taken by both audiences and representations from the semi-separation of the staged scenes to the entertainers who moved with the procession, the later of whom she links to the fool tradition. The bulk of her argument, however, centers on proving the fluidity between enacted and crafted representations, which together form the category of “personnages.” She convincingly argues that paintings, sculptures, and humans were routinely interchanged and mixed together in actual performances. These intersections are never a simple one-way street of paintings imitating plays, or vice versa as earlier scholars such as Emile Mâle claimed, but rather in a constant state of cross-pollination. [1] While establishing that this mixed mode existed is perhaps all that could be expected, it would have been interesting to see this line of thought developed further. What did the interchange between different types of practices entail beyond iconographic sharing—did such exchanges press the skills of artists or actors in new ways? Did audiences truly perceive no difference between media, or were there nuances to the choices made between multiple representational modes that future research might bring to light?

The relationship between manuscripts and performances is murkier in chapter two. Weigert begins with a consideration of a Passion play manuscript from ca. 1470 (Arras, BM MS 697). As in chapter one, she argues that the manuscript can provide access to the realities of late medieval performance; yet she simultaneously argues that the manuscript must be seen as a highly constructed work in its own right. This leads to a number of contradictory claims. For example, Weigert draws parallels between the site specificity of the performance’s urban setting and miniatures portraying a preacher that “visualize for the viewer a place within the urban environment of the play from which to perceive the fictive realm in which the figures interact” (p. 99). Four pages later, however, she stresses that the process of codification that transformed Passion play tradition into manuscripts involved “severing plays from any specific urban locations” (p. 104). Perhaps she sees a distinction between how text and image functioned, yet if so, the cause of this distinction is never clearly delineated or explained. Problems also arise in the interpretation of the miniatures as windows onto the play experience. In the extended discussion of the Raising of the Cross sequence, for instance, Weigert argues that the participatory nature of Passion plays is communicated by the way a reader turns the pages to “set the figures in motion” (p. 91), a process she likens to a flip book (p. 90). While this seems plausible when the images are enlarged and extrapolated out as figures in close sequence within the book, the original mise-en-page of the manuscript undoes any such comparison. There, the miniatures are separated by multiple folios of text and occupy disparate places within the double column text blocks: one cannot flip to create a proto-filmic effect, but instead encounters these images much as one does in other manuscripts of this period conveying all sorts of content. Similarly, the claim that the lack of defined backgrounds reflected the “expansive contours” of the scaffold system feels forced given that such vague settings are commonplace in all types of manuscripts of this period. In the end, Weigert could have made a more compelling case for the distance created by the codification process than the privileged access to real performance that she asserted here. This shift would further integrate this first section of the chapter with the second, which compellingly and largely convincingly traces an example of the codification process through the changes made between two manuscripts purporting to represent a 1547 Passion play in Valenciennes: the pre-1577 BnF MS fr. 12536 and its later reworking in the frequently reproduced BnF MS fr. Rothschild I-7-3 (dated 1577).

Weigert is on surer ground in chapters three and four, where she considers textile hangings. Looking primarily at Vengeance of Vespasian tapestries, in chapter three she argues that the overall effect of such large-scale weavings adheres to an aesthetic of artificiality that blocks simple identification with either the attackers or victims. Visually, the emphasis on surface pattern constantly asserts the textile medium and blocks viewers from taking in the scene as a whole, an effect she sees as paralleling the fragmented viewing of known staged productions. The tapestries’ use in contradictory contexts suggests that they allowed for multiple readings. At the funeral of Anne of Brittany, for example, the Vengeance tapestries hung near her body might be equally seen as pro-Crusade (if identifying with the Romans) or as a

metaphor for the suffering soul as Jerusalem (if identifying with the Jews). Chapter four also considers the Vengeance theme, comparing seven painted cloths of the subject in Reims with V  rard's printed edition of the play text. While this body of material has previously been used as evidence for the essential violence of medieval theater, Weigert argues convincingly that both rework tamer medieval versions to meet early modern tastes by reimagining the sprawling narrative along the lines of classical theater and drastically increasing the level of violence actually shown.

Chapter five journeys further into this post-medieval material, offering an extended analysis of a 1569 print of the exorcism of Nicole Obry (1566). This print has been used to illustrate medieval staging practices, but Weigert's careful study shows it is instead intended to serve as a witness to a quasi-liturgical/sacramental event that is presented as expressly not theatrical or illusionary. As such, it undermines any account of theatrical staging practices that relies on it as evidence.

While there are individual sections or readings that might be argued against, taken as a whole Weigert's book offers a compelling intervention into two major fields of study and as such should be read and carefully considered by not only art and theater historians, but also all those who seek to understand the ways in which past performance practices are imaged and imagined both in their own moments and today.

NOTE

[1] See, for example, Emile M  le, *L'art religieux de la fin du moyen   ge en France:   tude sur l'iconographie du moyen   ge et sur ses sources d'inspiration* (Paris: Libraire A. Colin, 1908).

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